

## The Canvas, the Body, and Art

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the interdisciplinary nature of art and what helps it blend. Art, as observed, is not singular. Any art form is backed up by elements of other forms. The most overlapping among all the art forms seem to be the visual and performing arts. Whenever a body is performing, the aspects of the same become dominant, yet they cannot exist without the visual stimulation of the audience. Or, if we change places, isn't any visual art a performance itself? This paper explores how the visual arts blend with the body of performance, leading to a creative space and its relevance and contribution to the development and expansion of the spectrum of arts. The inquiry navigates this confluence, reflecting on how one medium feeds into another, how paint finds motion in the body, and how the body, in turn, becomes a canvas. The lines between performer and artist, between object and subject, between ephemeral and permanent begin to blur, allowing for a space that is expressive, inclusive, and reflective of deeper aesthetic and psychological states. The purpose of this paper is to propose an interdisciplinary approach towards designing a pedagogy to train artists that is inclusive of certain human limitations. How can artists with visual and physical limitations be cultivated? This pedagogy aims to reach every human being who wishes to be an artist or is passionate about it. Through practice-based observations and conceptual analysis, this paper asks: What is the role of gaze in this interplay? Can performance exist without the visual? Can a painting be experienced kinesthetically? If a body holds a visual memory, is it art when recalled in movement? These questions drive the exploration, inviting further dialogue between movement, the body, and art. Ultimately, the paper hopes to provoke thought around the integrated nature of the arts and the necessity of transcending disciplinary boundaries in both art-making, witnessing, and training.

*Keywords:* embodiment, emotional memory, inclusive pedagogy, performing arts, visual arts

### Introduction

Art has long resisted being confined to a single category, thriving instead in the vibrant intersections where different artistic disciplines meet and inspire one another. This paper explores the fundamental interdisciplinary nature of art by examining the meaningful fusion between visual and performing arts and why this interconnection is essential for advancing artistic innovation, pedagogy, and inclusivity.

Interdisciplinary studies, in essence, involve blending approaches, methods, and theoretical frameworks from multiple academic fields to address complex issues and foster new understandings. When applied to art, interdisciplinarity transcends simply layering one form over another. Instead, it creates a dynamic process where visual arts, such as painting, sculpture, or digital media, and performing arts, like dance, theatre, and performance art, interact in a symbiotic relationship. This relationship transforms the processes of seeing and doing into simultaneous, intertwined acts. For example, a dance performance may be experienced as a living sculpture, while a painting might evoke the narrative and emotional dynamics of a staged performance.

The combination of visual and performing arts is one of the most prolific crossovers due largely to their shared reliance on the human body as a primary expressive instrument. Performance engages the body in time and space, producing often fleeting acts that are witnessed and interpreted by an audience. Meanwhile, visual art, though commonly thought of as permanent and static, originates from bodily gestures and invites viewers to engage in performative acts of perception and interpretation. This

convergence challenges conventional binaries, such as the distinction between painter and dancer or object and event, allowing new modes of creation and reception that combine temporality with materiality.

Foundational theories such as Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "total work of art" and the postmodern concept of intermedia pave the way for this fusion, breaking down artificial barriers between disciplines. Contemporary psychology and neuroscience affirm that artistic creation, regardless of medium, draws upon integrated cognitive and sensory faculties, underscoring the value of hybrid art practices.

Central to this interdisciplinary pedagogy is its commitment to disability inclusion and expanded access. Conventional art education often privileges normalized bodies and standard sensory experiences, unintentionally marginalizing individuals with diverse physical, sensory, or cognitive conditions. Interdisciplinary arts, by their very hybridity, offer greater flexibility and stimuli for creative expression and engagement, movement can substitute for vision, auditory and tactile senses can provide alternate avenues of experience, and impairment becomes a unique artistic lens rather than a barrier.

Current research highlights multiple benefits of such an inclusive approach: arts-integrated classrooms offer varied entry points that accommodate differing abilities and preferences; interdisciplinary pedagogies foster higher engagement, collaboration, and participation among learners with disabilities by enabling adaptable, multisensory modes; and adaptive technologies and participatory formats help blur the traditional line between artist and audience, cultivating democratic, accessible art-making. However, despite the promise, existing frameworks face significant challenges:

- i. Educational systems and funding bodies often maintain rigid disciplinary silos, impeding sustainable interdisciplinary and inclusive initiatives.
- ii. Many teachers and artists lack training or resources to implement integrated, disability-responsive practices effectively.
- iii. Assessment methods remain inconsistent or biased, often failing to capture the full range of interdisciplinary and embodied artistic achievement.
- iv. Resource and technological disparities limit access for many learners.
- v. Cultural attitudes still hinder acceptance and recognition of diverse bodies and disability as creative strengths.

In response, this paper proposes a transformative pedagogy that positions the body as both canvas and agent, emphasizing collaborative, adaptive artistic processes. It seeks to create spaces where all artists, regardless of physical or sensory difference, can fully belong, create, and be witnessed. By reframing inclusion as active participation grounded in bodily agency and self-directed exploration, this model challenges existing limitations and envisions a more equitable and expansive future for arts education.

This approach is not merely conceptual but aims for practical implementation that cultivates autonomy, mutual respect, and creative innovation, opening new paths for learners to embody and express their fullest artistic potential. Interdisciplinary arts teaching is thus reimagined not only as an educational strategy but as a holistic cultural practice that values diversity, embodiment, and the continuous evolution of art itself.

## Literature Review

### *Interdisciplinary Visual and Performing Arts*

Universities and academic institutions are increasingly designing interdisciplinary curricula that weave together visual and performing arts with digital media, theatre, film, and other creative fields to foster innovative hybrid artistic practices. For example, Queen's University offers a studio-based programme in visual arts that encourages exploration at the intersection of drawing, painting, sculpture, performance, and digital creation. This programme not only inspires experimentation across multiple media but also equips students with professional skills that can transfer across creative disciplines.

Scholarly research identifies several key historical influences shaping contemporary interdisciplinary arts. Central among these is Richard Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art,” which envisions the fusion of varied artistic forms into a single unified experience. Wagner's idea, along with early avant-garde movements, multimedia art developments, and the integration of art, science, and technology, forms the foundation for modern interdisciplinary arts scholarship. Today, this field is recognized as an emergent domain with distinct epistemologies and methods that go beyond traditional art categories to embrace a multidimensional, collaborative creative process.

In essence, these programmes and theoretical frameworks emphasize dissolving rigid boundaries between art disciplines to unlock new expressive possibilities and foster adaptive, integrated artistic education.

### *Body as Canvas and Embodiment in Art*

Neuroscientific research reveals that activities such as learning and performing visual arts alongside dance involve activation of several overlapping brain areas linked to perception, cognition, motor control, and memory functions. This overlap suggests that these artistic practices share underlying neural mechanisms. This evidence supports viewing the body not only as an expressive vehicle in performance but also as a dynamic “canvas” that stores, recalls, and manifests visual memories.

Scholars studying artistic embodiment emphasize the importance of kinaesthetic engagement, where movement reactivates visual experiences and transforms the body into a responsive medium for creation. In this view, the ephemeral nature of performance and the permanence of visual art are intertwined, as the body continuously shifts between remembering, expressing, and generating new sensory and visual content.

This neuroscientific perspective enriches interdisciplinary arts by revealing the brain's integrated processing of sensation, movement, and memory, thereby validating embodied approaches that fuse visual and performing arts through experiential, somatic practice.

### *Role of Gaze in Performance and Art*

The concept of gaze is understood as a complex and evolving interaction encompassing psychological, social, and bodily dimensions. Several theoretical frameworks contribute to this understanding: Lacanian psychoanalysis views the gaze as a manifestation of unconscious desire and processes of objectification; feminist theory critiques, particularly the notion of the male gaze, expose how power and gender intersect within acts of looking; while cognitive neuroscience utilizes tools like eye-tracking to study how visual attention and emotional engagement unfold in audiences experiencing performance and visual art.

Research shows that gaze functions as a relational mechanism connecting performers, viewers, and artworks. It transcends mere visual perception by incorporating kinaesthetic awareness and emotional response, making the act of looking an embodied, affective experience. This is especially significant in interdisciplinary art forms where the division between observer and participant, subject and object, becomes porous. In such contexts, gaze is not just about seeing but about co-creating meaning through a shared, interactive presence.

This multidimensional nature of gaze enriches interdisciplinary practices, highlighting how looking and performing are interwoven in ways that challenge traditional separations and open new possibilities for experiential and participatory art.

Major interdisciplinary frameworks applied to visual-performance studies encompass a variety of conceptual and methodological approaches that unite visual arts, performing arts, and broader cultural and cognitive theories.

The Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art,” centers on the integration of multiple artistic disciplines to create a singular, immersive experience. This foundational idea, championed by the nineteenth-century composer Richard Wagner, envisions a unified form of art that synthesizes music, visual elements, theatre, and movement into a cohesive whole. Wagner's approach

has profoundly influenced interdisciplinary art by encouraging collaboration and the breakdown of boundaries between different creative fields, setting a precedent for modern multimedia and hybrid artistic expressions. Historical avant-garde movements further expanded on this by challenging traditional definitions of art and emphasizing radical combinations of diverse media and live performance. Innovations after World War II, such as *Happenings*, *Intermedia*, and multimedia art, emphasized process and interaction, blurring distinctions between the artist and the audience as well as between object and event.

Contemporary interdisciplinary frameworks also integrate perspectives from science and technology, studying perception, cognition, and embodiment through lenses that combine neuroscience, psychology, and digital media alongside visual and performing arts. This melding fosters deeper understanding of how art is experienced and produced. Perceptual and formal analysis frameworks adapted from art history and vision science examine how formal elements, such as line, colour, texture, and spatial organization, interact with cognitive and sensory processes. These provide robust tools to analyse and create visual and performance artworks that engage the viewer both intellectually and sensorially.

In education, interdisciplinary frameworks guide curriculum design by merging disciplinary inputs to meet cognitive and creative objectives, balancing complexity and integration while actively constructing knowledge through practice. Performance studies add anthropological, sociological, and critical theoretical insights, expanding the analysis of embodiment, audience dynamics, and cultural meanings inherent in visual-performance artworks.

Audiovisual and multimedia models explore the synthesis of sound, image, and movement, offering practical and theoretical foundations for integrated live performances where different artistic elements converse in real time.

Embodiment theories intersect deeply with these visual-performance frameworks by affirming the body's role as an active creative medium and experiential site. The body functions as a canvas where visual and gestural elements coalesce, producing hybrid artworks that transcend conventional categories. This perspective foregrounds kinaesthetic and multisensory engagement, recognizing that art is not only visually perceived but also felt and inhabited. It emphasizes memory and identity as encoded bodily experiences, revealing how emotional narratives and visual memories are embodied and reenacted.

Social and cultural dimensions are integral, as visual-performance art frequently reflects identities influenced by gender, race, disability, and culture. Embodiment theories thus provide critical analytical tools to understand how these realities manifest in body-based art, supporting inclusive pedagogies that value diverse bodily expressions. For pedagogy, these intersections call for cultivating bodily awareness, adapting to individual physical capabilities, and encouraging sensory-rich exploration. Combining embodiment with visual-performance practices produces holistic artist training that bridges cognition, physicality, and creative expression, fostering innovation and inclusivity.

## Methodology

This research is anchored in close observation and rigorous analysis of a wide array of secondary resources, primarily focusing on the evolving field of inclusive, integrated arts pedagogy that combines both visual and performing art forms. Over recent years, multiple educational frameworks have emerged that attempt to break down traditional disciplinary silos, using arts integration as a vehicle for experiential, holistic, and accessible learning. These existing pedagogies reveal creativity and promise, but also highlight clear gaps in inclusivity, adaptability, and the empowerment of diverse learners, particularly those with disabilities or unique learning needs.

Several influential models, such as Art Integrated Learning (AIL) and other hybrid frameworks, offer strategies for merging visual and performing arts within academic and social settings. Research describes these methods as promoting not only subject matter retention and creative thinking but also fostering engagement, empathy, and critical reflection among participants. However, despite the evident benefits, analyses of these approaches indicate that much of the integration remains teacher-driven, focused on specific class projects, or tailored more to general inclusion rather than meaningful,

embodied participation for all. Universal Design for Learning is sometimes invoked, but rarely implemented in ways that address a full range of bodily, sensory, and cognitive diversities.

Through the close analysis of these and similar frameworks, this research sets out to propose a new, hybrid pedagogy that centers the body as both an agent of embodiment and a living canvas. This hybrid approach draws from both visual and performing arts, emphasizing their natural overlap, the performative gesture of drawing or painting, the visual spectacle inherent in performance, and the mutual stimulation of sight, sound, movement, and touch in learning environments. Above all, the proposed pedagogy seeks to move beyond theory toward lived experience, reimagining art-making as a fundamentally multisensory, collaborative, and adaptive process.

At present, this suggested pedagogy remains conceptual, rooted in observing established practices yet not fully realized in practical, classroom, or studio settings. The intention is to test and refine the model through future application and participatory action research, engaging artists, educators, and learners with diverse abilities in a continuous, reflective process. Through this ongoing work, the aim is to address limitations in the current frameworks, specifically those around accessibility, sustained engagement, and authentic bodily inclusion, while nurturing creative agency in every learner, regardless of physical or sensory limitations.

This research contributes a much-needed perspective to the literature, situating the hybrid, inclusive pedagogy as both a critical synthesis and a forward-looking response to the gaps persisting in current integrated arts education.

## **The Proposed Framework**

### *Learning Objectives*

- i. Develop multisensory artistic literacy: Students will engage in artistic processes that integrate visual, performative, tactile, and kinaesthetic modes, cultivating a holistic artistic vocabulary and expressive capability beyond traditional disciplinary limits.
- ii. Cultivate embodied artistic awareness: Learners will deepen awareness of their own bodies as dynamic canvases and creative instruments, understanding how movement, gesture, and sensory experience shape artistic meaning and form.
- iii. Foster inclusive and adaptive creative practices: Students will practice adapting materials, techniques, and modes of engagement to accommodate varied physical, sensory, and cognitive abilities, championing diverse expressions of creativity.
- iv. Enhance collaborative and reflective skills: Participants will develop interpersonal skills necessary for collaborative interdisciplinary projects and engage in ongoing reflection to articulate embodied experiences and creative intentions.
- v. Build capacities for critical aesthetic inquiry: Students will analyze interdisciplinary artworks and performances through frameworks of gaze, embodiment, and multisensory perception, linking practice with theory in critical dialogue.
- vi. Empower agency in artistic exploration: The pedagogy aims to nurture student autonomy and confidence in experimenting across media and modes, encouraging risk-taking and original expression grounded in bodily awareness.
- vii. Integrate technology thoughtfully: Learners will explore hybrid tools and digital media that enrich embodied art-making and inclusive participation, balancing technological fluency with sensory and physical engagement.
- viii. Promote lifelong learning and flexibility: The curriculum will equip students with transferable creative problem-solving skills and adaptive learning strategies useful in diverse artistic and life contexts.

When bodies of individuals are engaged as canvases to experience and learn arts, both visual and embodied, this approach opens a profoundly inclusive and experiential educational space. The use of the body as a site of artistic exploration acknowledges the uniqueness of each learner's physical, sensory, and cognitive makeup. It transforms art education from a fixed, standardized transmission of

knowledge into a dynamic, self-directed journey grounded in personal embodiment, imagination, and multisensory engagement.

In this pedagogy, the reception and creative experience of art are mediated through the body of the learner. For a visually challenged individual, visual arts become accessible through a rich combination of aural cues, tactile experiences, imagination, and movement, enabling them to “see” through sound, touch, and embodied memory. Conversely, a learner with physical challenges might engage with performing arts and visual stimuli in ways that respect their movement range and unique sensory capacities, amplifying the use of adaptive visual cues along with participatory embodiment. Such flexibility ensures that no two learning experiences are identical, honoring the learner's autonomy and capacity for self-organization.

Crucially, this pedagogy rejects preset, rigid training protocols. Instead, it embraces a learner-centered ethos where pace, mode of engagement, and artistic focus are fluid and self-determined. There is no categorization or hierarchy of learners based on ability, rather, learners are invited to explore and express through the sensory-motor capacities available and meaningful to them. This freedom nurtures initiative and agency, allowing individualized pathways of discovery and expression to flourish.

Beyond individual learning, mixed training sessions and collaborative projects are core components. These collective spaces facilitate the exchange of diverse experiences and methods, fostering mutual respect and learning without “capable” or “less capable” labels. Participants become co-creators in an ecosystem of shared creativity and adaptive knowledge. Facilitators are present not as directors but as guides, offering support and scaffolding when needed while preserving learner autonomy.

This approach is distinctive from many existing pedagogies in several key respects:

- i. It situates the body itself as an active, creative canvas, not merely a tool or passive subject.
- ii. It operationalizes self-directed, adaptive learning rather than applying uniform instructional templates.
- iii. The pedagogy emphasizes multisensory, multimodal access to both visual and performing arts, uniquely accommodating diverse abilities through sensory substitution and personalized embodiment.
- iv. Collaborative learning is framed to deconstruct hierarchical ability differences, promoting reciprocity and collective creativity.
- v. The concept of gaze is broadened to include learner choice, whether directed inward, to the self, or outward, to an audience, enhancing psychological and aesthetic agency.

Ultimately, this inclusive, hybrid pedagogy builds a foundation of mutual trust in the learner's capacity, regardless of physical or sensory difference, to inhabit their body as source and medium of artistic creation. It invites learners to tap into their fullest expressive potential, to engage in dynamic dialogues between sight, sound, touch, movement, imagination, and memory. In doing so, it transcends conventional educational limitations and stereotypes, cultivating an empathetic and expansive artistic community. Learners are no longer defined by deficit or ability but empowered as whole, embodied beings in constant creative evolution. This pedagogy offers a template not simply for accessible art education but for transformative human expression and connection through the arts. Such an approach, grounded in embodiment and experiential agency, marks a significant innovation, bridging multidisciplinary theory with adaptive practice, inclusivity with artistic rigor, and individual autonomy with collective creativity. This conceptual framework awaits iterative development and empirical testing but promises to enrich both pedagogical discourse and the lived experience of art for all learners.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper has sought to illuminate the profound potential and necessity of an interdisciplinary, inclusive pedagogy that integrates visual and performing arts with a central focus on the body as both medium and canvas. Such an approach transcends traditional disciplinary confines and introduces a flexible, learner-centered framework that recognizes and values the inherent diversity of human embodiment. By examining existing pedagogies and frameworks, the proposed hybrid model

emerges as an innovative synthesis, grounded in the lived experiences of all learners, including those with physical or sensory limitations, while emphasizing self-directed exploration and multisensory engagement.

This pedagogy's hallmark is its emphasis on embodiment as the basis for artistic experience and learning. It foregrounds the body's role not just as a vessel but as an active, creative agent, enabling learners to engage with art on deeply personal and sensory levels. For visually impaired learners, this means experiencing visual art through sound, tactile feedback, and imaginative interpretation. For those with physical disabilities, it entails adapting movement and sensory input to their capabilities, ensuring full participation without restrictive categorization. This adaptability and respect for individual rhythm and agency mark a notable departure from rigid, standardized methodologies.

Furthermore, the pedagogy champions mixed-ability collaboration as a tool for mutual enrichment rather than comparison or hierarchy. In doing so, it dismantles notions of ability and incapacity, fostering a community where differences are strengths and creative potential is shared. Facilitators play a supportive, rather than directive, role, encouraging autonomy and fostering trust in learners' capacities. The choice of gaze, whether to perform for oneself or an audience, underscores this agency and psychological nuance, engaging learners in dynamic dialogues about perception and presence.

This research highlights gaps in existing frameworks, such as limitations in truly inclusive access, inadequate adaptation to multisensory learning, and the perpetuation of categorical distinctions that can inhibit creative freedom. By responding directly to these challenges, the proposed pedagogy offers a pathway to enrich art education with equity, creativity, and holistic experiential learning at its core.

While theoretical and conceptual at this stage, this hybrid interdisciplinary pedagogy lays critical groundwork for future empirical validation and practical implementation. Its commitment to inclusivity as a lived practice, not merely rhetoric, positions it as a transformative paradigm in arts education. This opens new avenues for all learners to inhabit their bodies more fully, cultivate creative agency, and participate authentically in the evolving spectrum of visual and performing arts. Ultimately, such a pedagogy is not just about teaching art, it is about fostering human connection, empowerment, and expansive modes of expression that reflect our diverse embodied realities. It invites educators, learners, and institutions alike to rethink, reimagine, and rebuild arts education as a truly inclusive space where everybody can create, witness, and belong.

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## **Biography**

**Sramana Banerjee** is an independent researcher and a performing artist from West Bengal, India. Her research focuses on abstract and experimental movement and practice-led methodologies. As a dance practitioner-researcher, she is currently focusing on solo choreographic works. She has published in edited books and presented at national and international seminars.